*Questioning our Obsession
with Work, Creativity,
and Entrepreneurship*

THE CHURCH AFTER INNOVATION

Andrew Root

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

(Don't Skip! Read Before Using)

In our family's best moments, our dinner table is a philosophical workshop. We once held a long debate about what makes something a chip. Owen was claiming that gluten-free chips were not *real* chips. We wondered what elements or components make something the thing it is. We all like to think about where things come from. Once, as we were eating birthday cake, Maisy, at thirteen, wondered about the origin of the phrase "You can't have your cake and eat it too." She mentioned that it was nonsensical. She had her cake and she was eating too. She offered to us that it would be better if the phrase were "You can't have your cake and eat it twice," which is basically what the phrase means. During that dinner we talked for nearly an hour about cake and possession and the loss of something even when having it. We were all, to different degrees, mesmerized by where things come from.

This book is born from that same inclination. If there is a popular or important new emphasis in Protestantism, it's innovation. Everyone seems to be talking about innovation. Innovation is popping up everywhere—congregations, denominations, colleges, foundations, camps, parachurch ministries. Institutions and leaders across the church have innovation fever. And why not? Innovation seems exciting, a way to infuse verve back into waning institutions, a way to embrace creativity and to be proactive. After all, innovation and entrepreneurship, along with creativity, are superstars of business, particularly in Silicon Valley.

ix

Before the church baptizes innovation as the answer to its problems (or design ideation as the way to uncover new church practice), we should ask where innovation and entrepreneurship come from. Nothing comes from nowhere. All perspectives, ideas, and practices have deep and rich moral codes hidden within; they all have a history. This book seeks to excavate innovation and entrepreneurship so that those advocating or using innovation and entrepreneurship in the church can know where these ideas come from and what they are tied to. The reader should beware that this book is only a first step. In this project I wear my cultural philosophy hat more securely than my theologian's hat. This book is interpretive—where did innovation come from and what moral visions of the self does it deliver? I can't really solve all the problems I raise. *This is only a beginning step.* Other projects and people will need to pick up where I leave off. This project fronts some questions for engagement if innovation is to avoid creating more problems than it promises to solve for the church.

I am deeply committed to the Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor school of cultural philosophy that reminds us that our ways of being, and particularly the ideas that shape us, have long historical tails. My goal in this book is to point out the tail of innovation, entrepreneurship, work, the self, and the church. Cornel West, in his superb book *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, expresses just what I hope to accomplish in this book, giving flesh to how such thinking works. Referring to his own book, West says, "In regard to method, this work is a social history of ideas. It conceives of the intellectual sphere of history as distinct, unique, and personal sets of cultural practices intimately connected with concomitant developments in the larger society and culture."[1] This is exactly how I'm thinking of this project. Innovation and entrepreneurship—for good and ill—are inextricably connected to capitalism. You can't engage with them without coming up against the claims and commitments of late capitalism. This project examines the economic shape of our lives, seeing how the economic shape of our lives is bound in a secular age, pointing out how innovation and entrepreneurship play their part in how we work. Perhaps it's better, if we are to get our feet on the ground, to say that innovation and entrepreneurship are directly connected to the way we work in a competitive, and at times dehumanizing, economy.

1. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 6.

This project seeks to explore work in late modernity, tracing out its secular forms to examine how innovation and entrepreneurship bring these goods and commitments back into the church. I'll show that the flow has reversed. Where once Protestantism and its commitments flowed directly into work, shaping work, now the ways we work in late modernity (driving toward permanent innovation) have come flowing back into the church, shaping what counts as ministry.

But so what? This book is not an exercise in protectionism. My goal is not to protect ministry from the influence of late-modern neoliberal work. I am not arguing that the church shouldn't learn from the contemporary moment and must instead return to a cloistered form. Rather, I seek to show that innovation and entrepreneurship make distinct, formative claims about what it means to be a self. They inflate the self, leading to significant theological and formational (i.e., faith-formation) issues. Innovation and entrepreneurship are dependent on workers (and consumers) being obsessed with themselves. We must face this issue. Innovation and entrepreneurship are not value neutral; they are not absent of implicit commitments to certain theological anthropologies, even views of salvation history. It's true that there are many innovative and design processes that seek to be user-centered, student-centered, and driven by empathy for the user—and this disposition might fairly be called others-focused. But even these noble desires need to be tested. The cultural history of ideas embedded in the thought of Berlin and Taylor reminds us that expressed desires differ from the actual realities that shape us. This project is an excavation. It asks whether these stated desires of design and innovation are reachable. No form of human action happens outside the many forces that impact it. Just because there is the desire to have empathy for users does not mean that other goods do not short-circuit that desire. The very fact that such advocates use the phrase "user" for person may point to some underlying anthropological commitments.

In previous projects, I've sought to explore what late modernity does to us and how to respond to it theologically. I allowed thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Hartmut Rosa to lay the interpretive footing, using other thinkers to build off their core cultural-philosophical thoughts. I'll rely on another thinker here, turning to another acclaimed German cultural theorist who is not well-known in the English-speaking world (at least not in ecclesial or theological circles): Andreas Reckwitz. Reckwitz's field-defining work includes two important books, *The Invention of Creativity* and *The Society*

of Singularities, the second of which was awarded the Bavarian book prize, which led to him receiving the prestigious Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize in 2019. My project here is particularly engendered from coming in contact with Reckwitz and others' theories. As with my other projects, I've used a running story line to lead readers to what the ideal construction might look like. But in this project especially, I'm using story to illustrate the importance of these ideas as they relate to Protestantism's new infatuation with innovation.

In what follows, I'll place Reckwitz's insights in conversation with the new Protestant ecclesial obsession with innovation and entrepreneurship. We'll see how this obsession is funded by both the late-modern drive toward singularity of the self and the late-modern invention of creativity as a high (at times the highest) good. But before doing so, we need to clarify what innovation is and where it came from, seeing its birth inside of capitalism and an age of authenticity. Then we'll explore how our economic systems came to be and how capitalism fits within the immanent frame we inherit.

The argument below is cumulative. It builds on itself. There may be times that you'll feel more needs to be said or that these claims need to be justified further. I ask you to hold on; many of those possible questions will be addressed in later chapters. To address them with the depth they deserve, I need to give the background. For instance, I'll make some critical assertions about creativity in the first few chapters. This may rub some readers the wrong way. I ask you to hold on and allow the argument to unfold. (If it becomes too much, you can jump to chap. 7 and my discussion of Michel Foucault and Reckwitz. But I've left this chapter toward the back of the book because it works best to build to it.)

The major portion of this book contains a cultural-philosophical discussion. But theology is not left out. After doing this cultural-philosophical work, understanding the location of our profession of faith and the location where we're called to be faithful, we can examine a way forward theologically. Yet readers should be aware that my theological construction will only be introductory and suggestive. What is actually needed in response to the church innovation fascination is still under construction (though I've made significant assertions about what kind of church is needed in my book *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*). In this book, I'll make some further suggestions, but a full-blown answer will have to wait. I'll focus on one issue in particular—the late-modern inflation of the self or the self's obsession to be an innovative, singular self inside the permanent innovation of neoliberalism. I'll then turn

to three important, but often overlooked, theological offerings that come to us from medieval mysticism. I'll explore the thought of Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and the *Theologia Germanica*, all of which, to differing degrees, influenced Martin Luther and his theology of the cross (or the "thin tradition"). These works are able to address the significant and hidden problem of the inflating of the self that a moneyed economy imposes on people, turning people in on themselves. In the final chapter I'll turn to Friedrich Hölderlin and his poetry of epiphany (and a present practical example) to hint at a way beyond the traps of innovation.

It's my hope that this project—by carefully examining both the location of our profession of faith and the constitution of this profession—will add texture and depth to this welcome desire to steward the church into faithfulness. In the end, we'll see if innovation and entrepreneurship are the most helpful ways forward for the church (and Protestantism) in the secular age of late modernity. As you'll see, it may be a medicine that does more damage than good.

I offer this project with some fear and trembling, understanding the popularity and significance of innovation and entrepreneurship, even among many whom I deeply respect. I hope this project is seen not as a deconstructive rant but as a way of deepening our shared understandings and commitment to steward the church and faithfully respond to God's action in the world.

Alone and staring at a computer screen, you can never be sure if your intentions are communicated. Only good friends and able reviewers can free you from your own presumptions. Therefore, I'd like to thank many who invested in this project and gave me invaluable feedback. Particularly, I'd like to thank my dear friend and running partner David Lose for reading the whole manuscript and providing important feedback. Bob Hosack and Eric Salo at Baker were amazing to work with again. Eric has been such an important editor, and Bob's overall belief in my work is a treasure. I understand that I don't fall into a clear category. My works have centered on ministry and church life yet have offered intricate and complicated arguments. My works are not quite ministry books and not quite guild-based academic books. Their "between" status makes me all the more humbled and grateful for Bob's vision and belief.

My colleagues and friends Michael Chan and Michael DeLashmutt provided insightful critique to my ideas. DeLashmutt's feedback was as funny as it was penetrating. Erik Leafblad and Wes Ellis, regular readers of my projects, again offered much to strengthen my offerings. I thank David Wood for

his continued support and interest. Jessicah Duckworth, with her keen eye, offered a number of important insights. Jessicah has been a valuable dialogue partner since we were next-door neighbors at Princeton Seminary. It was at the same time at Princeton that I met my most trusted dialogue partner, Blair Bertrand. It's Blair, outside of Kara, that I trust my writing to most.

And it is to Kara again that I end with my loudest thanks—mostly for our life together. Our life together is a blessing too deep, an epiphany too grandly filled with grace for words.

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Only the Creative Survive

How Mission Became Married to Innovation

I'd never used the phrase before. It seemed like an idiom covered in the dust of the 1940s. It was an expression that might have found its way into an early Frank Sinatra chorus. To be honest I hadn't really even understood what it meant until this very moment. But it perfectly encompassed this young pastor who stood before us, reading a story as the launch to his synod's annual continuing education conference. He looked *just* like "the cat that swallowed the canary."

Every time he read the words "THE CHURCH," a clever, proud, and gratified look came across his face. He tried to hide it, but it was impossible. His satisfaction with whatever shrewd end he was after, while hidden from us, caused him to emphasize those words. He read "THE CHURCH," taking his attention from the paper to reveal his eyes to this room full of pastoral colleagues. Those eyes glowed with wily self-assuredness bordering on smugness. He read, fighting back a mischievous smile:

> "THE CHURCH has seen closures at an alarming rate."
>
> "In its heyday, in the 1990s, THE CHURCH saw boundless growth, but now decline is the norm."
>
> "The decor of THE CHURCH, which historically matched the aesthetic of its time, is now tired and unappealing to young people of a digital age."

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"Things in THE CHURCH have become stale. THE CHURCH is connected with an America that has passed away and few want to return to a dead institution."

"We realized if THE CHURCH didn't change, it'd be finished."

"People just no longer seem interested in THE CHURCH. There is a disconnect. People don't want what THE CHURCH is offering. THE CHURCH needs to find a new angle."

"We'd seen ourselves at THE CHURCH as part of every neighborhood . . . and now our neighbors are ignoring us. THE CHURCH needs to find a unique and appealing way to connect again with its neighborhoods, providing them what they want."

This all led up to the last line in the story. As he began to read, the proud pleasure couldn't be contained, and though it was slightly inappropriate, a little smile, like a submerged buoy, popped to the surface of his face. He seemed unable to hold it under. Behind him, on a screen, the final line appeared as he read it. Fighting back a full-on grin, he read through his pleased smirk:

> It is time to innovate or die. THE CHURCH knows that it is now or never. Design a new way forward or disappear. Innovation is THE CHURCH's only hope!

And now it was time for the punch line. Now this young pastor's colleagues at this continuing education event were allowed to see behind the curtain. This article wasn't about the church at all. The next slide showed the article's title, in bold: DOES APPLEBEE'S HAVE A FUTURE?

The young pastor, with feathers stuck to the corner of his mouth, said, as if it wasn't obvious, "This article I was reading isn't about the church at all! It's about Applebee's! Just like us, they know they need to change. And the decision before them is the same decision we have before us. Can we find the creativity to design new ways of being the church? Can we innovate? Like Applebee's, if we don't, we will die. Our synod needs to reinvent. If Applebee's gets it, the church better too. So that's what this conference this year is all about."

With that, I was introduced as their speaker.

Wobbled by the introduction, I was sure I appeared to the room as the very opposite of the confident cat that ate the canary. In my mind, I looked like the man who ate his Applebee's signature twenty-dollar combo meal too fast and now had disorienting heartburn and deep-fried coconut shrimp burps.

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My disorientation seemed to have two sources. First, the heartburn came from the greasy, deep-fried way the well-meaning young pastor had connected Applebee's with the bride of Christ. I suppose there are analogies between Applebee's and the church. Both have institutional structures. But just as there are some structural similarities, there had to be some significant ontological distinctions, or at the least some radically different moral horizons that made the easy connection (even replacement of one with the other) between Applebee's and the church problematic. While both are struggling institutions in our shared cultural moment, don't there need to be radically different reasons for their existence and solutions to what could save them?

But the second source of my disorientation really pushed me off balance. Innovation seemed to be the ubiquitous answer for both the struggling entity Applebee's and the ministries of the church, which is the body of the dead, risen, and ascended Jesus Christ. Everywhere I go across the American Protestant church—even more so after the pandemic—people are speaking of innovation. Seminaries (like my own), local congregations, Christian colleges and universities, parachurch ministries, camps, and even foundations all have innovation on their lips.

I began to wonder why so many Protestant leaders think that innovation is important, even for some the church's last, best hope. Where did this relatively new attention to innovation come from? How did it become so pervasive? And why does it seem so powerful and important to so many smart, faithful, good leaders across the church?

All these questions were racing into my mind as I was giving my presentation. On the fly, I needed to reposition my content, and my very self, as an asset for innovation. I wasn't told I was going to need to do that until the introduction! Yet the more I tried to do this, the more questions started to populate my head—like soapy bubbles, one question produced a dozen others. The proliferating made it hard to concentrate. As I clicked forward one slide and a video clip rolled, my mind was drawn to an anecdote a friend had just told me a week before.

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My friend Russ was the associate pastor of a midsized mainline church in South Jersey, a short drive from Philadelphia. It was a good, solid church.

There was nothing flashy about it. Nothing really set it apart from other mainline churches in the area. Its only peculiarity was its steady and engaged young adult ministry. A group of college students and young professionals, either studying or working in Philadelphia, regularly participated in a Sunday night worship service, Bible study, and social hour. This too wasn't flashy. But twenty young adults consistently participated, which is no small feat for a mainline church.

Russ figured this participation got the congregation nominated and accepted for a grant project from his alma mater seminary. The whole project was directed toward young adults. Its objective was to empower—and fund!—young adults' supposed innovative and entrepreneurial spirit within congregational life. The grant was made up of groups of young adults from eleven congregations. They were taken through a three-year innovation process in which they would design something new for their churches.

The first year was electric. Each group of young adults got to know each other—which was fun. They also got exposed to innovative exemplars in business, entertainment, and art—which was inspiring. The pull of creativity, and the invitation to be creative, produced a swelling sense of anticipation and excitement for Russ's group.

But it all came crashing down in the middle of year two. As Russ's group moved into designing and creating something, they became stuck. They had dozens of good ideas that could be a real help to their church. But the better the ideas, the more anxiety they produced. Only one idea could be funded. Which idea was the right one? Worse, they were haunted by the nagging possibility that maybe there was a better innovation, a more creative response, if they just kept ideating. As they looked around, their own idea didn't seem nearly as creative as those from half the other congregations they'd gotten to know. For some reason, that felt really bad. Their ideas were good, even helpful to their church, but in their minds they didn't seem to pass the threshold of being truly creative, possessing an aesthetic to admire. Their ideas were good. But they were taught that good is the enemy of great.

Russ just couldn't crack why. Why did innovation, which excitingly opened these young adults to creativity, seem to turn existential? Why was there intensity, even anxiety, to meet some aesthetic threshold? Why did invention or reinvention become competitive? There was nothing on the line! Each congregation was getting the same amount of funding, no one was kicked out for a mediocre idea, and no extra money was given for the *best* idea. Yet

the need to come up with a truly ingenious, creative, and artistic innovation seemed to wrap itself around these young adults' sense of self. Russ admitted that it did the same to him. It did something to his self and his young adults' self. This had a direct impact on their faith formation.

I survived my presentation, hiding well enough that my mind was spinning around these questions. A guest speaker at an event inhabits two platforms or stages, even if only one has a podium. Both, at least for this introvert, call for a full dose of energy. The first, of course, is the stage where you give the presentation. The second stage is the table where you eat, filled with conference participants. My strategy is to find a table that will keep the topic on TV shows, sports, or even the weather—anything other than a continuation of the Q and A from the other stage.

But when those surface-level avenues of conversation close, my strategy is always to invite the person I'm sitting with to talk about themselves. I have genuine interest in both learning about them and, importantly, distracting them from asking for a personalized part two to my lecture.

At the dinner after my presentation with this synod, I found myself sitting next to one of the synod executives. I was slightly worried I'd missed the mark with my presentation. He assured me I hit the target. He was kind and welcoming, expressing his appreciation for my presentation. I asked him about the local college football team. But we only became comfortable with each other when we discussed our favorite Netflix docudrama series: *Fear City*.

As we ate our dessert, a lull descended on our conversation, so I asked him about his job. He explained that the bulk of his work had shifted over the last five years. Painfully, nine of the congregations (including three of the largest) in the synod had decided to leave the denomination. This denomination's bylaws state that the local synod, not the congregation, owns the church's building. In order to keep its building, each departing congregation needed to reach a financial settlement with the synod. So the synod was now sitting on millions of dollars, not sure what to do with the funds. There was no celebration in this financial boon. To see these congregations depart caused only pain. Added to this grief was the concern about how best (and most faithfully) to use these funds to serve the ministry of the congregations that remained.

"It felt a little like blood money," the executive told me. There was an initial push to divide the money between the remaining churches. Or to use the funds to maintain the synod's existing buildings. There were more than a dozen small, declining churches barely making budget that desperately needed roof repairs. A new roof wouldn't slow their decline, but it would keep them open another few years.

"That seemed so short-sighted," the executive said, and I agreed. "So we finally came to the conclusion that it was mission and only mission that these funds would be spent on. No roofs!"

I admired this, and I asked him what counts as mission.

Without missing a beat, he said, "innovation," equating the two. "We're funding only innovative ideas. Innovation is how we do mission. Innovation *is* mission. This money is for reinvention, for new invention, for something new. If you've got a new idea, pitch it. If it's truly creative, there's a good chance you'll get the funds. We don't want to waste this money. We want to do something creative and truly innovative with it. As you heard before your presentation, this synod is now truly and fully missional."

I actually hadn't heard anything about mission. "Missional" was never used even once. "Innovation" was—many times. In this executive's mind, to say "innovation" was to say "mission" or "missional." I was surprised with how smoothly (and seamlessly) mission and innovation were equated in his mind. In both the imagination of this executive and in the synod as a whole, mission and innovation were assumed to be of the same whole cloth. It was almost unthought (and perhaps unthinkable) that they could be different. The mission of the congregation, the synod believed, was to be innovative. An innovative congregation was a missional congregation. Period. Mission took the concrete and (in this not unusual case) complete form of innovation.[1]

I couldn't argue against the fact that equalizing the two was advantageous. The synod was sitting on a once-in-a-generation honeypot of resources. The problem was that this cache of cash offered a total and complete one-off chance. Once it was spent, it was never coming back. It was imperative that

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1. Examples of books and arguments that move toward this fusing of mission and innovation are L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016); Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *How Change Comes to Your Church: A Guidebook for Church Innovations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019); and Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). These are good books, but they don't tease out how late modernity colonizes innovation.

it be spent in the best way possible, even parlayed into more resources for more long-term stability. The executive felt the heavy burden of this pressure.

The pressure intensified because of the undeniable fact that the honeypot of excess resources was oddly, and painfully, born from rotten spoil. It felt like blood money because it was the one-time payoff that produced the final and legal separation of those congregations from the denomination. The money finalized this devastating divorce, imbued with harsh words, shouting matches, threats, and wounds that both sides figured would never heal. With the divorce final, and no hope of reconciliation, the synod needed to move forward.

The Self after a Divorce

What do you do when you're left with the pain of a divorce but an influx of cash from the settlement? What's the best way to spend the money? The cultural answer is that you innovate and therefore reinvent yourself. The synod was merely following this dominant cultural narrative that we inherit. This narrative is played out in its most bombastic color on shows like the Real Housewives franchise. Though absent the bluster of reality TV, the synod revealed that it was following something like this narrative when it equated mission and innovation.

In this story line, the divorcée, flush with cash and disappointment, seeks something *new*. You innovate your lifestyle. You surely don't squander this chance to do something creative, to even become a unique self. You go to the gym and work on your abs, update your wardrobe, take a pottery class, learn about wines, and make new, more interesting, and creative friends. If you have the airline miles, you might even try to find yourself by eating in Italy, praying in India, or falling in love with a Brazilian businessman in Indonesia. You might visit these countries to find and even invent your own truest "I."[2]

Whatever you do, you tell yourself, you can't waste your chance to do and even *be* something different—to lean into your creative self and find out what makes you uniquely you. If you can find that creative self, you'll be happy, and your cheating spouse will regret they ever left you. Your new creative

2. This reinvention plays out in Elizabeth Gilbert's bestselling memoir and film, *Eat, Pray, Love*, the epitome of the many such cultural narratives of the divorcée innovating a new self.

self will attract new friends, lovers, experiences, and your former spouse's jealousy. Or perhaps the result will be that you pacify the pain of what's been lost by reinventing yourself into a new self. What greater mercy for your self, bestowed by you, than to become a new self who lets go of all those past disappointments?[3] You can now be a self who lives beyond, who doesn't even remember, the losses of the old, less creative world that you once inhabited. You can even call the divorce good, or at least necessary, because it got you out of your rut, replanting you into creativity and helping you find your unique voice, vision, and direction. At all costs, you use the disappointment and the funds of the settlement to make a creative switch, to innovate your way of being in the world in your mission of being a happier self, having unique and creative experiences.[4]

Money for the Creative

Money buys the opportunity to be creative and seek innovation. Of course, sensibly spent money can buy security and stability. Those things are nice and important but also boring, our culture assumes. The wrong way to respond to a divorce and its financial settlement is to choose security and hunker down with your disappointment and max out your 401(k) (or to upgrade roofs). Money can create stability, but not creativity. A new roof would give a small church some measure of security and budget stability for years, maybe a decade. But it would not provide the new creative thrust to shake that little church loose from its drab commonality, pushing it into the future.

Within the logic of late modernity, it's assumed that without the creativity of the self, there simply is no future. Or to state it more brashly and bleakly, it's assumed that without the creativity of the self (without creative uniqueness), there's no real reason to live at all. Creativity has a powerful place in the vision and commitments of late modernity. True, creativity is a good and deeply theological commitment. But blended with the pursuits of the self in

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3. See Glennon Doyle as an example of this.
4. Andreas Reckwitz adds, "The demand to be creative calls on people to realize their innate potential by working on themselves. This universalization of creativity leads to a second social differentiation between creative and non-creative acts and people. If creative achievement secures social inclusion, then a deficiency therein will lead to social demotion and marginalization. The deficient must assume the responsibility for not having made proper use of their potential." Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 222.

late-modern capitalism, it becomes something the self performs (we'll explore this further in chap. 7).[5]

In late modernity, the individual or institution that doesn't want to be creative doesn't want to live well. These individuals or institutions must change and seek creativity; they need innovation. Late modernity asserts that the best way to ride into the future, and not to be defeated by the future, is on the wave of creativity produced by the self.[6] To not want to be creative is to not want a future, to not want to be unique, to not care to be a distinct self. The ultimate aim of being a self is to seek and curate your inherited (and yet somehow at the same time, achieved) uniqueness.

The synod assumed that the money would be wasted if spent on anything other than creativity and innovation in its congregations. The synod needed to be missional, because mission was never a waste. That approach seemed theologically justifiable, but even more so, it fit the presumptions of late modernity. Mission could never be a waste because it was assumed to be a creative enterprise. Mission fused with innovation because both attended directly to the future, seeking creative ways to move into something new. The synod felt deep down that it would be a waste to not spend the money on a creative initiative, because creativity (never just cash) secures a future.

Because innovation could be equated with mission, innovation was the opposite of waste, even a safeguard against it. In the synod's mind, seeking something novel and discarding things for the sake of new invention was considered the antithesis of waste. In the logic of mission-as-innovation, it's assumed to be a waste to maintain what was. This odd logic is nevertheless deeply embedded within us all in late modernity. It's odd because innovation and invention almost always produce large amounts of waste. You innovate by successive failure. For example, Thomas Edison, the crowned genius inventor of the modern age (until Steve Jobs usurped him), whom business books love to reference,[7]

5. Willie James Jennings, in *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), chap. 2, calls attention to a genealogy of creativity that was used to colonize and to create whiteness.

6. Reckwitz states, "Throughout all its component parts, the creativity dispositive makes creativity a universal focus. Every individual and every social practice can and must assume the positions of the creative producer and recipient. The ideal of a creative form of living dictates the comprehensive participation in the practices of the creativity dispositive." Reckwitz, *Invention of Creativity*, 220.

7. One example book says, "As Thomas A. Edison reportedly said, 'to have a great idea, have a lot of them.'" Linda A. Hill, Greg Brandeau, Emily Truelove, and Kent Lineback, *Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business

had a strategy for innovation built on waste.[8] Edison innovated by making small incremental changes—piling up glass bulbs into a mountain—until bang, one of those little changes, and the waste that necessitated it, brought the big innovation. Edison believed you just keep making small tweaks, discarding old versions, wasting resources, swinging for the fences, as you search for your home-run invention. It's no surprise that Edison yo-yoed between opulent fortune and financial failure his whole life. This drive to invent, as business books reveal in their lauding of Edison, makes Edison a genius of the late-modern creative aesthetic. Edison was willing to risk it all for the thrill (and fame!) of his innovation.

The synod didn't want to waste its funds, but it also knew that it couldn't hold its money as a miser would. It wanted badly to seed its congregations. It believed that the only soil where this seed-money could grow (*grow* being an interesting word that we'll return to in chap. 10) was ground tilled by expressive creativity. Creativity bound in the self—in late-modern capitalism—grows money into more money. Edison and J. P. Morgan knew this, creating a partnership in which Edison provided the creativity and Morgan the money. This partnership led to a heated rivalry over who was the more essential component. Most of us would pick Edison, because we laud creativity. We know creativity has the great advantage of bringing growth by making resources appear to have some greater purpose than just being a resource. Innovation even says this growth is itself creative.

Creativity is the engine that grows a commodity. That growth can produce the resources for a future of more creativity. More creativity, turned into more resources, can produce a stable, even inspiring, bridge into the future. And not just a bland future filled with base resources, but a future where you're a more interesting self, made so by your own attention to creativity. Creativity gives you a future rich in both material goods and meaning. It provides resources for the future and forms you into an interesting and unique self in

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Review, 2014), 138. Tim Brown adds, "Thomas Edison led the way with the opening of the first modern industrial research lab—the so-called invention factory—in 1876, and research and development has been part of manufacturing companies ever since. Though they may not be quite as ambitious as 'the Wizard of Menlo Park'—Edison famously promised a minor invention every ten days or so and a 'big trick' every six months—most manufacturing companies assume that the way to ensure a stream of products tomorrow is to invest in technological research today." Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York: Harper Business, 2009), 180.

8. See Edmund Morris, *Edison* (New York: Random House, 2019).

this future. Inside these deep assumptions about creativity, innovation can be lauded and then fused with mission without much reflection.

Stale money, used to procure security and stability, is not the same as innovation. It's actually the opposite of being innovative. Innovation is always a risk for the sake of creativity.[9] It's a risk that wagers that the expense in and for creativity will produce more dynamic, sustaining resources and more interesting (unique) institutions and individuals. The creative institution, company, or congregation risks security and stability for a unique design born from creativity itself that can produce a future of resources.

After all, who wants to be IBM when you can be Apple?[10] Apple uses its money for creativity. Creativity grows money, giving Apple more resources to chance more creativity. More creativity grows more money, but all for the sake of more creativity—or wait, is it all for the sake of more money? It doesn't really matter as long as the commitment isn't broken. The creative Steve Wozniak and money-growth-obsessed Mike Markkula worked together long enough to make Apple into a juggernaut because they agreed on this creativity-for-growth equation. It doesn't matter if Steve Wozniak thought the equation's final answer was more creativity, or if Markkula thought creativity was intended for more money (or higher stock prices). The equation just keeps working, producing more creativity and more money for more creativity and more money. The system even works best when a company's or institution's leaders disagree on the purpose of creativity. The money folks drive harder when they assume money is most important. The creative folks give more when they assume creativity is the highest good. It's best when programmers and designers, for instance, believe in creativity for the sake of more creativity and when CFOs and accountants see creativity as a means to fiscal value. This tension can spur on a company, but it can also cause one of the leaders to leave the company in anger, asserting that the organization no longer cares about creativity or is fiscally irresponsible, exposing its shareholders to reckless risk.

9. "In a time of rapid change, the ability to innovate quickly and effectively, again and again, is perhaps the only enduring competitive advantage. Those firms that can innovate constantly will thrive. Those that do not or cannot will be left behind." Hill, Brandeau, Truelove, and Lineback, *Collective Genius*, 9.

10. Apple has become the richest company (worth over $2 trillion) because it has been the most innovative and creative. Apple is a tech company for singularity, IBM for a rationalized modernity. Apple grabbed the market by pushing creativity and self-uniqueness. Its technology is the tool used to create innovative selves.

Ultimately, Apple is seen as innovative and IBM not because Apple is creative. It procures its growth by creativity, which produces more creativity without end. Innovation is valuable, as we'll see in coming chapters, because it has within itself an inherent sense that it's cold fusion, a form of growth without limit. When creativity is the energy source that fuels an organization, congregation, or self, its emissions are more creativity. Creativity is assumed to be a self-propellant that produces more creativity in an endless loop (forget all the piles of glass bulbs and all those chemicals needed for processors).

Unlike IBM, Apple is first a creative firm, more than it is rational or technical. It's as much a design and marketing firm as a technology company (really it has redefined a tech company to be equivalent to a creative firm). Late modernity touts that the future belongs to the creative who is singularly unique. From within late modernity, only creativity seems to be able to deliver a future. And only the unique seem to survive.

The synod could use the money to sustain its congregations. But that would only make the synod a welfare state, disincentivizing each congregation from using its creativity to either sink or swim. In the synod's mind, its congregations were *not* ultimately facing a financial challenge. Rather, the synod tacitly assumed that the congregations were facing a deficit of creativity, which only inadvertently created the financial challenge (and mission became creativity encased in theological rhetoric).

The synod believed its congregations didn't really need the money, but instead should use it to awaken (or expose the lack of) creativity. Creativity could save. The synod leadership couldn't stomach (it felt wrong and wasteful) throwing money at uncreative congregations (yet, if you could show your creative/innovative stripes, pointing to a missional attention, the money was yours!). When the synod looked into the future, it believed it needed congregations that were creative and that sustained themselves through creativity.[11] These kinds of congregations had a mission, a clear direction on how to move by creative uniqueness into a dawning future. Their creative uniqueness would produce resources to sustain the congregation into the future. This combination of clear direction (mission) with surging energy to be creative, even planting a flag in uniqueness, gave some congregations, in opposition

11. There are many little congregations that are indeed creative, but cannot, even in that creativity, sustain themselves financially. Inside this logic, they are somehow not creative because this creativity is bound in the ideals of the growth economies of neoliberalism. Much more on this below.

to others, the label of "innovative." Those that were creative and unique, and able to use this creativity and uniqueness to procure a future, would receive the money. They were an investment in innovation.

Innovation was the way to use this money well. It was the best way to live after the divorce proceedings. Supporting creativity was the most advantageous way to be for the future. And in turn, it was the best way to broadcast to all the haters that the synod and the denomination itself were still interesting and vibrant. Innovation as the manifestation and mobilization of creativity was the way for the synod to get its groove back.

An individual or institution whose creativity surpasses a certain threshold reaches the status of being singularly unique. You have reached the summit of creativity and achieved a high good in late modernity when your self or your institution is so creative that it is one of a kind. There is little better in late modernity than to be singularly and undeniably unique.

Authenticity and Its Uniqueness

Late modernity highly values uniqueness because it is bound in authenticity. We live in an age of authenticity, as Charles Taylor describes it and as I've discussed in other places.[12] Our age drives toward being authentic. Every age makes assertions about the right way to live a human life and therefore about the appropriate shape of its institutions. Our age says that a well-lived life is an authentic life. A life becomes authentic when the individual (or institution) who is living in the age of authenticity embraces their own uniqueness. Authenticity and uniqueness are *not* the same, but the overlap is extensive. They necessarily and mutually feed off each other.

Uniqueness, for instance, can be interpreted only as a compliment, never an insult, because it's embedded in an age of authenticity. If a neighbor or coworker were to look at your outfit and say, "Well, aren't you a unique one," most of us would take this as a compliment and beam with pride. Even if the comment had a passive-aggressive edge, we are mainly culturally wired to take it as an affirmation. But to say "Well, aren't you a unique one" to someone in the age before the dawn of authenticity would be an insult. Unless you were a bohemian painter in Paris or a Romantic poet in

12. See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

Weimar, you'd assume you were being ridiculed by the comment. Before the age of authenticity (and still now in places that don't embrace the age of authenticity), to be called "unique" was to be called odd and weird (which, unlike today, had only bad connotations).[13] This means that uniqueness, while maybe in the smallest measure interesting, was, more so, reason for exclusion and ridicule.

A phenomenological genealogy of bullying would reveal this (though I don't know if one has ever been done). I believe it would show that uniqueness, or standing out, once was reason for derision. You wanted to fit in by being unnoticed, conforming to the fashion and practices of your school or neighborhood. However, now being ignored is its own heavy form of scorn. To not be recognized for your own uniqueness is to encounter a form of oppression.[14]

In late modernity, almost universally, to say "This is a unique coffee shop" or "This church is so unique" or "You're a very unique person" is to say that this coffee shop, church, or individual is attractive and therefore good. This coffee shop, church, or individual has a sure future because the shop, church, or individual is so creative that it has made itself into a singular being or place. This creativity becomes truly unique, hitting the threshold of singular uniqueness, when it answers only to its own creative impulses. Its uniqueness is found within its own self. It is unique by following its own singular, creative, interior impulse to be itself (again, uniqueness is both somehow an inherent and yet achieved reality for the self).

In late modernity, the unique individual or group is the creative who follows their own impulses as an ethic (the right way of being and doing). Taylor has said that the age of authenticity is born from an ethic of authenticity. This ethic goes something like this: no human being should tell another human being what it means for that unique human being to be human.[15] The ethic asserts that no one should ever tread on someone

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13. Keith Sawyer adds, "In the United States, we tend to equate creativity with novelty and originality. But the high value that we place on novelty isn't shared universally in all cultures." Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

14. I don't say this flippantly in any way. Recognition since the days of Hegel has been very important. I've written about this in *The End of Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), chap. 7. But for much more on the importance of recognition in late modernity, see Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

15. See Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 1–25.

else's creative impulse, because everyone should be *free* to seek their own uniqueness.[16]

Overall, the uniqueness reveals that the coffee shop, church, or individual is following only what speaks to it, that the coffee shop, church, or person is taking a heroic step to determine itself, living out of a creative center within itself. You're authentic when you're uniquely and singularly doing you, when you are living and acting as you wish, creatively presenting your unique self to the world. To be authentic is to be one of a kind. This is why my friend Russ's group felt stuck, unable to move forward with their idea. It just didn't seem to be truly unique; it didn't unveil in its aesthetic that they were authentic selves. The ideas they had for their church were helpful, but not unique enough, especially compared to the other groups. The goal of the grant, to its credit, had a much larger aim—to mobilize young adults for God's work. But this aim, to Russ's surprise, was so quickly and easily supplanted. They couldn't let go of their anxious comparison, even when the grant team and Russ told them it didn't matter that their ideas weren't creative enough. The drive to be a creatively unique individual or group held a heavy moral and ethical weight that they couldn't quite name.

Where Authenticity and Uniqueness Diverge

Authenticity and uniqueness mutually reinforce each other—and overlap. But we need to explore also how authenticity and uniqueness are different, each imposing different claims on us. This difference explains why authenticity and the freedom to be unique (from within your own creative center) have failed to produce anything like a utopian society of free-flowing affirmation. If we had achieved this, the tweets populating Twitter would *only* consist of positive affirmations, instead of the dumpster fire of hate that fills it now. As part of our cultural imaginary, authenticity and uniqueness are deeply related. Uniqueness is assumed to be a compliment (a statement of something good) because of its location inside our age of authenticity. But uniqueness nevertheless has elements to it that produce tensions in our late-modern age of authenticity.

16. I emphasized *free* here only to point out that this ethic has so much to do with views and senses of liberty. It might be better to say that it undercuts and confuses people about what liberty really is. For instance, inside the ethic of authenticity and the drive to obey your own impulses, public health mandates to wear a mask become perceived as a violent act that destroys an individual's authentic way of being.

My commitment to or even support of authenticity is in large part hands-off. I'm even ethically supporting authenticity when taking steps to be hands-off. I'm hands-off (even as a parent of an eleven-year-old) by allowing another to seek their own authenticity. I affirm this pursuit of authenticity by giving this other the space (from judgment or cultural expectation) to wield their creativity and be unique. And I allow our age to be authentic when I live and let live, when I refuse to tell another self (even a coffee shop or church) how to live their own life. I support the age of authenticity when I let the coffee shop, church, or individual self do their own thing, refusing to judge or deride them for their pursuit of creativity. In an age of authenticity, refusing to tell another human being how to live their life is ethical.

I support an authentic society when I stand up against those who are too hands-on (whether for political or religious reasons) in telling others how they should live their lives. I can even become quite forceful, even verbally and violently enraged in my commitments to the hands-off-ness of authenticity, when I perceive someone else imposing their own views or will on another individual's uniqueness and creative freedom to do their own self.

I must remain hands-off, allowing any self to live from their own creative center. An age deeply ingrained in authenticity will, not surprisingly, honor and laud uniqueness. But here's where uniqueness ultimately asks something different of us than authenticity asks (which leads to a conundrum): uniqueness cannot actually be honored (and even affirmed) in a hands-off manner. While authenticity asks me to live and let live, to be hands-off, uniqueness seeks and demands (even if it hates) my direct judgment. Authenticity tells me no judgment is allowed, but uniqueness can be substantiated both culturally and existentially only by the fire of judgment.[17]

The unique individual or coffee shop is, and can only be, unique in relation (even competition) with others. No wonder Russ's group felt paralyzed by their merely "good" ideas. No wonder, even over and against the wishes of the grant, the young adults (even Russ) felt a stab of competition in the

17. This collision seems to pop up everywhere in our time. Those seeking to be unique demand the hands-off-ness of authenticity ("What does it matter to you who I sleep with?") and yet can't accept this hands-off-ness. At some point they demand recognition, even accepting negative judgment for its charge to ignite a more ambitious articulation of uniqueness. Our society is divided not only because authenticity is the ethic we live by (this could be good) but because inside of authenticity is this existential drive for uniqueness that needs to live with deep judgment of both friends who affirm and enemies who deride. Both give the juice to continue my pursuits of singular uniqueness as a self.

process of innovation. This invitation into creativity moves quickly from the free space of authenticity to the drive for uniqueness. And uniqueness, which innovation in some measure seeks, is laced with heavy forms of judgment. The young adults felt that if they couldn't come up with a singularly unique idea that was deeply innovative, their very selves would be less creative, less unique, than others. Uniqueness is a fundamentally ranked category.

For instance, a young woman is considered unique because her creative originality outstrips that of others. To be a unique coffee shop means there must be a hundred that are not unique (like all those Starbucks). To call this coffee shop or individual unique, I must judge her as so in opposition to all the others. To testify to uniqueness, I must do something authenticity is uncomfortable with: use direct and bold judgment. Both authenticity and uniqueness mutually glorify, and feed on, creativity—and therefore both uphold the importance (and dream) of being singular. Both affirm that this singular creativity has its source in the impulses, drives, and desires of the inner self (they laud subjectivity). But authenticity calls me to be hands-off and to never judge, to live and let live, while uniqueness calls me to always, as my very lifestyle, judge and evaluate everything and everyone. It takes little to see this ranking and judging everywhere in our culture. If I'm good enough at this judging evaluation (doing it uniquely enough), I can even make this evaluative judgment the very conduit for my own unique creativity (hence, countless ranting YouTube stars giving their judgments on everything from face lotions to senators). In late modernity, you must somehow never judge while always judging. Other than the stars of *Queer Eye*, very few can elegantly pull this off (we'll return to this in chap. 8).

Back to Innovation and Mission

This discussion about authenticity and uniqueness provides some insight into why the synod executive so quickly equated mission and innovation, and why the language of innovation has become ubiquitous across American Protestantism. Mission and innovation are so easily equated because they both *appear* to do two things at once. First, both appear to produce *more* (more direction, identity, members, market share, energy, and overall growth) out of the initial investment. This felt good and smart to the synod. In a world organized by fiscal capitalism (run mainly by financial markets and the rise and fall of stocks and dividends, as opposed to the labor output of supply

and demand of manufactured products), there's nothing more astute than to turn a one-time payoff into an exponentially recurring return. Innovation allows your money (or energy, creativity, etc.) to work for you. It allows the mission to continue, for you to be continually missional. To turn a one-time investment into continued returns is a successful mission, which requires real innovation.[18]

Second, mission and innovation can be equated because something other than future returns is promised. Mission and innovation both seem to be forms of keeping your eye on the future while nevertheless producing new ways of inhabiting the now. Innovation as mission delivers the relevance of authenticity and common cultural drive for uniqueness. Mission and innovation (innovation as the shape of mission) produce (for an institution or individual) a kind of lifestyle, a way of living creatively and uniquely that produces meaning by creativity and the drive for uniqueness. Mission as innovation is fit for both growing future resources and producing a sense of meaning in the now, because both embrace the late-modern hypergoods of creativity and uniqueness.

The next morning, as we gathered for the second session of the conference, it appeared that the whole Applebee's thing wasn't digested well by all the pastors in the synod. The same executive I ate with the night before stood to introduce me. But before he did, he reminded everyone that the synod was after innovation that was faithful and unashamedly Christian innovation. They were only talking about innovation because it was for the sake of the gospel. This innovation was seeking a direct connection to God's own innovating work in the world. The point wasn't to cash in on growth, he said. I figured he said this to remind himself as much as the others in the room. Rather, he continued, the synod supported innovation for the kingdom of God. It was innovation as mission, to join in God's own mission in the world.

I nodded my head in affirmation.

I was then reintroduced.

18. The heart of the missional church movement is *missio Dei*. I personally am quite committed to it. But even within the missional church conversation there has been some slippage. Though mission is bound in the act and being of God, there seems to be this ever-present temptation to move it from a revelatory, even transcendent, reality to a management reality. Particularly in practical forms of the missional church conversation, mission is often connected with a new—more theologically legitimate—modern sense of growth. It may be no longer in a crass church-growth way, but nevertheless the innovation impulse can fall into these traps.

After my presentation, I found myself at the lunch table of a group of mid-to-late-career pastors. Many had been in the synod for decades, each one of them for longer than the executive. I was listening intently for an opening, hoping someone would mention some TV show I could turn the discussion toward. But it never came. Instead, a fit man with a well-kept white beard that started just above his light brown turtleneck said with an edge in his voice, "Well, I think you're handling all this innovation garbage quite well."

I froze, not knowing what to say. It was a compliment, I guess, but one that put me in an odd spot.

Frozen in that moment, I realized I was at the table of contrarians. I quickly recognized that these were the pastors who wanted the money divided. A few of them could have really used a roof repair. But as they spoke, they didn't justify their opposition in such self-serving ways. Rather, they talked of liturgy, creeds, and sacraments. Innovation was wrong because it wasn't deep, because it ignored the tradition, because it was a fad, just a hipster spin on church growth.

I had my own concerns with the easy equation of mission and innovation, but these innovation-allergic old-schoolers made me long for the executive's energy and direction. I had my apprehensions about innovation—I sensed there were hidden goods within it that needed to be reflected on. But this stale, thin opposition, framed as the defense of tradition and intellectual depth, seemed the height of banality to me. I realized, as I politely but quickly finished my lunch and made my exit, that the executive and the pastors for change in the synod would need to do some deeper thinking than they had. I was mainly on their side, but I was convinced that just adding "faithful" or "missional" to innovation, or claiming it was God's work, wasn't enough. All that was maybe true (maybe!), but we needed to think much deeper about it all.

For instance, to say that innovation is faithful demands an articulation of both what you're faithful to or who you have faith in. And, just as importantly, faithfulness demands a clear understanding of the location in which you profess faith and live out this faithfulness. I was now convinced that the thought leaders who were pushing the church to embrace innovation as mission had not helped the synod executive recognize the content, object, and location where such innovation would take place. They assumed that innovation was a practice free of the moral horizons of late modernity. To them, innovation and social entrepreneurship could be picked up and used without recognizing

that they were tools or texts born inside the presumptions of the immanent frame of late modernity.

If innovation is to be faithful, to be a profession of faith, if innovation is to be at least a continuation of Luther's "Here I stand, I can do no other" (the heart of Protestantism's cleaving to faith), then more work needs to be done to understand where this *here* is that we stand, and how standing *here*, in late modernity's secular age, we embrace an ecclesiology that is truly faithful. It may be that innovation is indeed faithful, but we will know that only if we examine in depth what we've started above.

Those like the executive see innovation as an ecclesial good. Period. Yet when you look at the use of innovation in the history of the Western church, it is almost always derogatory. Only in our contemporary moment has innovation become an overwhelmingly positive term. Before modernity (pre-eighteenth century), it was used negatively. Throughout modernity (eighteenth through twentieth centuries), it was mostly neutral. In late modernity (late twentieth and early twenty-first century), it has been used almost exclusively in positive, even laudatory, fashion.[19] To be innovative, creative, and inventive is the highest praise we can give to an individual, institution, or product. To be an innovative theologian pre-eighteenth century was to be a heretic who should be avoided.[20] To be an innovative theologian in the twenty-first century is to be exciting and well worth the read. This interesting development may tell us something important. Our task in the chapters to come is to answer why innovation in the church has shifted from being morally suspect to morally admirable.

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19. For more on this idea, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

20. In their excellent book, Lee Vinsel and Andrew Russell say, "In fact, during the Middle Ages, innovation—from the Latin word *innovare*, meaning 'to make new'—was a distinctly bad thing. Church dogma was society's guide, and innovation, or the act of introducing new, heterodox ideas, was heresy that got lots of people killed." Vinsel and Russell, *The Innovation Delusion: How Our Obsession with the New Has Disrupted the Work That Matters Most* (New York: Currency, 2020), 20.